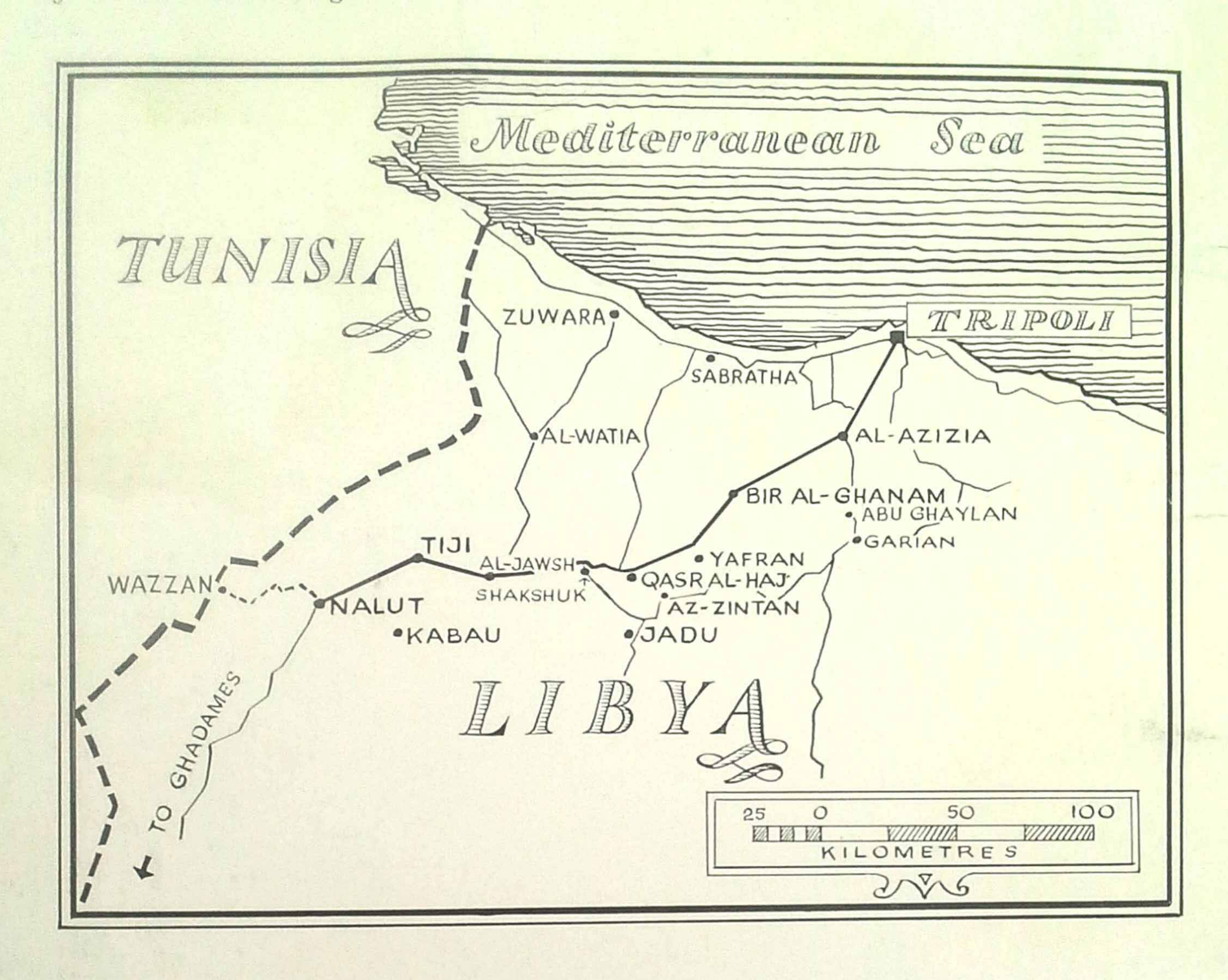
MOTORING TO NALUT

PHILIP WARD • ANGELO PESCE

OASIS TRAVEL SERIES NO. 1

front cover: inside the grain-store of Nalut



This is the story, in words by Philip Ward, and pictures by Angelo Pesce, of a drive from Tripoli, principal port and city of western Libya, south across the sandy Jafara to Jadu and Nalut, in all senses the highest points of the trip. Two days are ample for the visits described in this itinerary, even if one rises no earlier than eight.

On the first day one would see the market town of al-Azizia, the grain-store of Qasr al-Haj, the oasis of Shakshuk, green Janawan below Jadu and Jadu itself, arriving at Nalut on the new road via al-Jawsh and Tiji.

On the second day those with access to vehicles of the Land-Rover type can go past Ain al-Ghaza'ia to Wazzan, 4 kms. east of the Tunisian border, or to Kabau on the road back to Jadu that goes over the mountains. Those not so equipped will explore old Nalut, especially the magnificent fortified warehouse built on a crag opposite the recently-renovated hotel.

Distance The outward and return journeys total six hundred kms., including brief diversions. The road is flat, almost straight, and surfaced with asphalt throughout. It is infrequently used by vehicles, however.

By Car Fill the tank and a jerrican with petrol, and check oil, water and tyres before leaving Tripoli. After al-Azizia there are filling-stations at Yafran (off this route east at the Bir Ayyad cross-road, km. 119), Jadu (km. 192), al-Jawsh (km. 234), and Nalut (km. 310).

By Taxi A private taxi to Jadu and Nalut will cost from L£25-30 (depending on negotiations) for the two-day trip, spending the first night in Nalut.



a landscape typical of the route to Nalut

By Bus Frequent local buses of the Nisr (Eagle) Line connect Tripoli with both Jadu and Nalut via Bir al-Ghanam. As times and prices are subject to change, bus-goers should make prior enquiries at the Central Bus Station outside the city walls opposite the State Tobacco Monopoly. As we go to press, only one bus (leaving Tripoli at 7.30 a.m.) gets to Jadu, via Yafran, the same day. Buses leaving Tripoli at 11.30 and 3 spend the night at Riaina and reach Jadu the next day. A fast bus leaves Tripoli for Nalut at 2 p.m. daily, arriving at 7 p.m. Another leaves Nalut at 7 a.m., getting to Tripoli at noon.



a horseman among the olive groves of Suwani

km. 0 Tripoli. Leave from Bab al-Azizia.

km. 7 State Gypsum Factory on the left, after main industrial sector.

km. 12 Parish Church of Funduq at-Tughar. Permanent exhibition of sketch-plans, maps and publications describing the Christian Antiquities of Tripolitania, arranged by P. Giacinto Ravasi.

km. 22 Village of Suwani, eucalyptus trees lining the road, and cypresses surrounding the church.



along the road to Azizia

km. 44 Market town of al-Azizia. A *shade* temperature of 134.6°F recorded here on 13 September 1922 constitutes the joint world record, according to the U.S. National Geographic Society, but this figure is not officially recognised by the Libyan Ministry of Communications. Drive up the hill to the left for a panoramic view of the Jafara, or plain, the fertile district of al-Azizia, and the distant mountains. Quarries immediately to the south.

km. 45 Leave al-Azizia by the right fork signposting Ghadames. Extensive olive groves on both sides of the road.



the level countryside on the way to Bir al-Ghanam

km. 58 Quarries on the left. From now on the road runs parallel to the western scarp of the Jabal Nafusa, with the level Jafara on the right as far as the eye can see. Thousands of acres of scrub give ample grazing for the sheep and goats herded by semi-nomads.

km. 87 The Government farm of Shalghuda.



the oasis of Bir al-Ghanam

km. 95 Bir al-Ghanam. The name means 'Sheep's Well', an exact description of the function of this isolated place, reminding one of the paramount importance of water-supply in the arid expanse of the Jafara, whose mean annual rainfall nowhere exceeds 200 mm. and drops to below 100 mm. near the Tunisian border. One often sees several hundred sheep and goats around this well, which is also a popular watering-place for camel-caravans. The numbers of semi-nomads is decreasing rapidly with the rise in economic opportunity caused by the oil industry.

km. 119 Ayyad. A well that marks the intersection of the plains road, bearing right, with the hill road up to Yafran to the left.



the village of Qasr al-Haj, showing low-price housing project

km. 144 A prominent signpost in Arabic indicates a track to the left which leads to az-Zintan via ash-Shintira, a route only for the adventurous.

km. 152 Turn off the main road left into the oasis of Qasr al-Haj. In the centre of the village is a Berber *qasr*, or castle, originally built as a fortified grain-store to enable the population to withstand prolonged sieges, with an open space in the middle for tents.



outside the grain-store of Qasr al-Haj

The mud walls are still used as a hive of a hundred and fourteen cells to store grain and olive oil extending from basement level upwards.



inside the grain-store of Qasr al-Haj

Each family possesses one cell (they vary in size, some being roomy caverns, others cubby-holes that only the youngest member of the family can enter) and the keeper, whose name is Mahalhal, unlocks the *qasr* at certain times every day to permit the withdrawal of food.



on the road to Shakshuk

km. 177 Oasis of Shakshuk. The road continues straight on to Nalut, but a trip to Jadu is advised. Bear left in the direction of the mountains, stopping to enjoy the views of the palm-fringed wadi and gardens on your left.



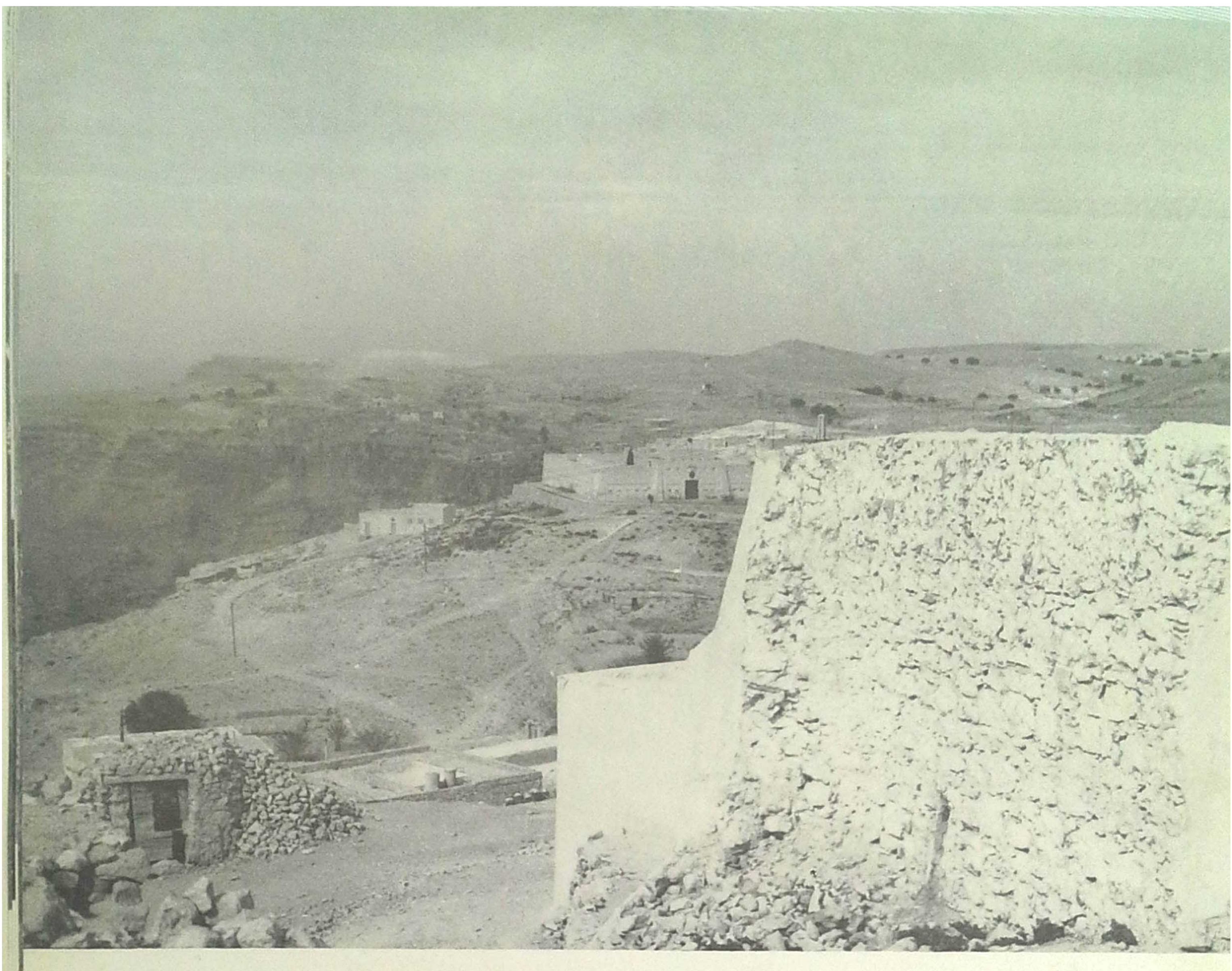
the oasis of Shakshuk

On the right are houses built for the local people at government expense under a nation-wide housing project. The older houses have their own appeal: a single story of dried mud and brick is covered by a roof of palm-trunks and fronds, with whitewash round the door.



terrace farming on the slopes of Janawan

km. 188 Village of Janawan, glittering green with terraced gardens on the orange-brown mountainside.



new Yujlin, on the left

km. 192 The main square of the modern town of Jadu, with its small hotel and filling-stations. After looking round here, drive back down the hill a short way to the police station, over which the Libyan flag is flying. Behind the police station one makes out a succession of villages: old Yujlin (now uninhabited), new Yujlin, Ushibari, and al-Qusir. Tamujat, locally pronounced 'Tamugat', is out of sight below al-Qusir.



Ushibari, centre

In 977, Ibn Haukal describes 'the commercial city of Jadu' as possessing a mosque with a *minbar* (pulpit).



al-Qusir, centre right

Al-Bakri confirms its importance a century later, quoting Muhammad bin Yusuf al-Warraq (d. 973) as saying that Jadu was 'a large city with bazaars'.



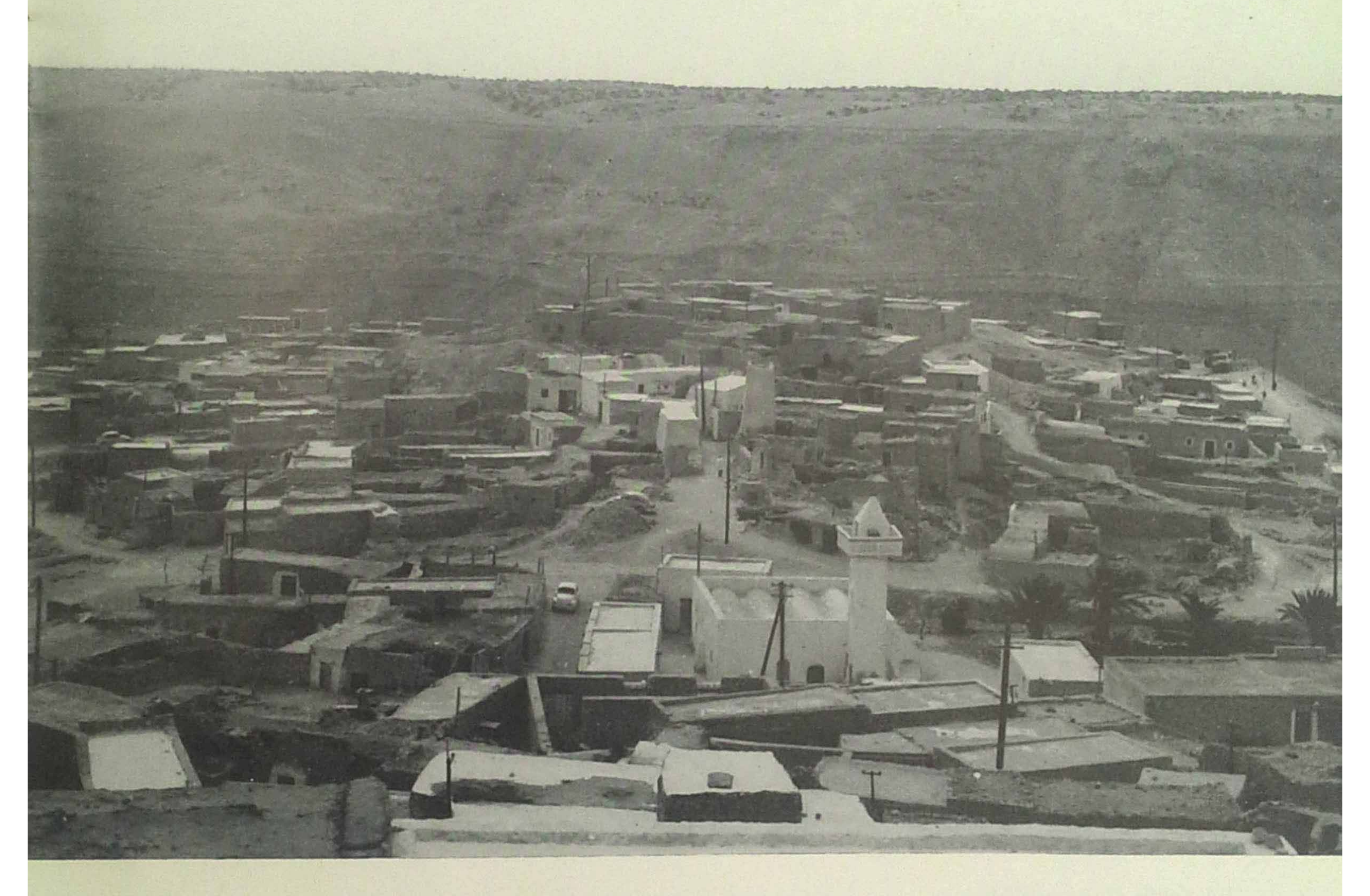
children of Jadu

The caravan route from Tripoli to Zuwaila and Sudanese Kanem passed through Jadu, and it is reported that al-Janawani, the governor of the Jabal Nafusa on behalf of the Imam of Tahart in the first half of the ninth century, knew 'the language of Kanem' as well as Arabic and Berber. The last mention of old Jadu, whose name probably derives from the tribe of *Gadaiae* mentioned by Corippus in A.D. 549, is in the *Kitab as-Siyar* of the Ibadite shaikh ash-Shammakhi, dating to the twelfth century.



old Jadu

In front of the police station there is a good view of the most interesting part of Jadu: the Old City, whose focal points are the ruined mediaeval castle and nearby mosque.



new Jadu

New Jadu, by contrast, is no more than four hundred years old. A pleasant spot for a picnic not far from Jadu is Ain Zarqa (the Blue Spring), which lies at the end of a track on the right of the mountain road towards Kabau.



the oasis of al-Jawsh

km. 208 Shakshuk crossroads again. Left to Nalut. The scrub becomes sparser.

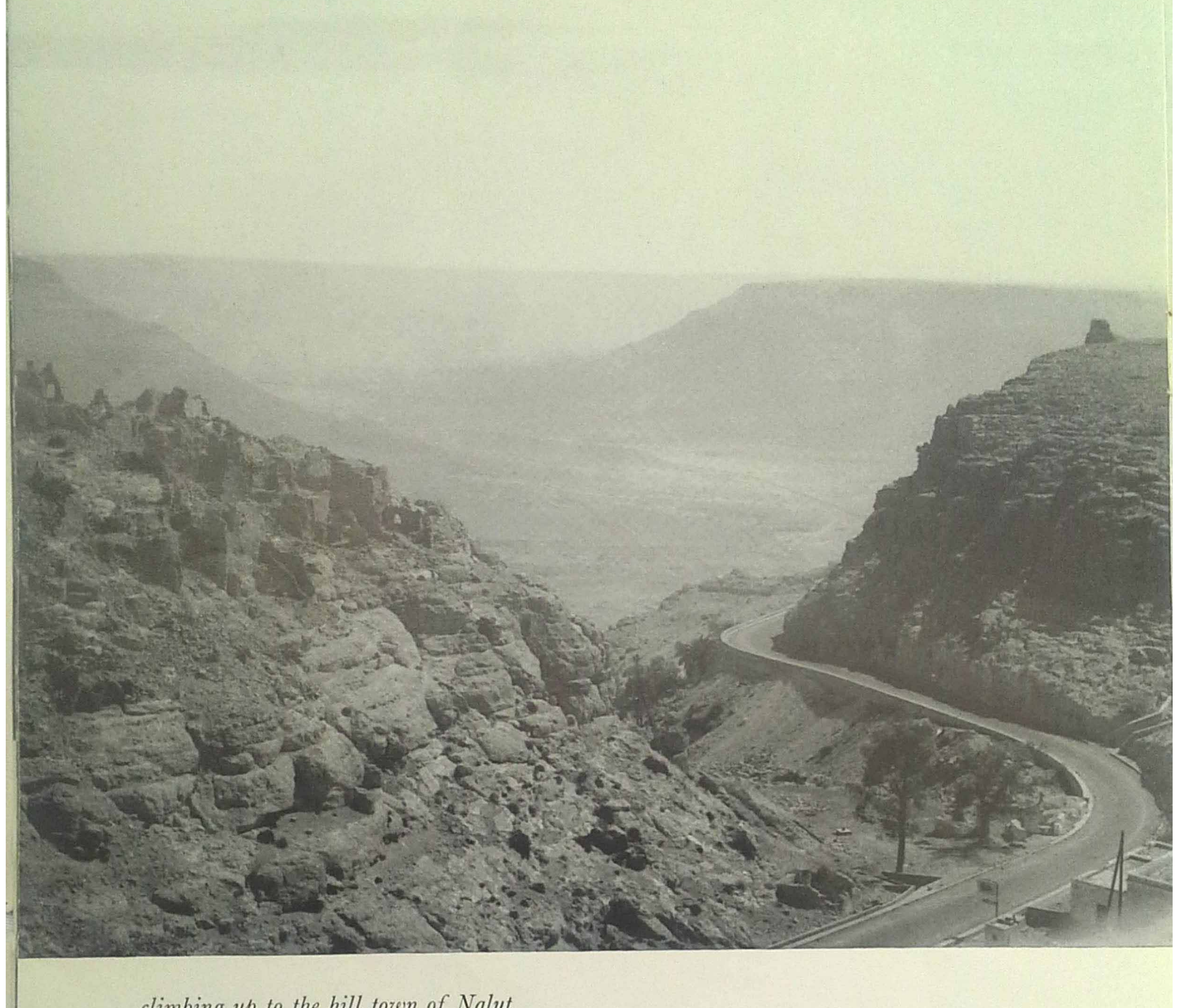
km. 234 The oasis of Jawsh as-Saghir, the *saghir* meaning not 'small' as is usual but 'young' in age. It has a population of about three hundred, while Jawsh al-Kabir, a little further south, has only about one hundred. Cold drinks are available near the filling-station. This is a stop for botanists, since the tended gardens are colourful and wild flowers carpet the countryside after the slightest shower. The traveller will drive past fields of broom and rosemary, asphodel and lavender on his way to Tiji.

km. 267 Tiji oasis, supporting about two hundred people. This is the country of the Sian tribe, semi-nomads whose range extends from al-Watia south to al-Jawsh and west to Bir Ziqzau.



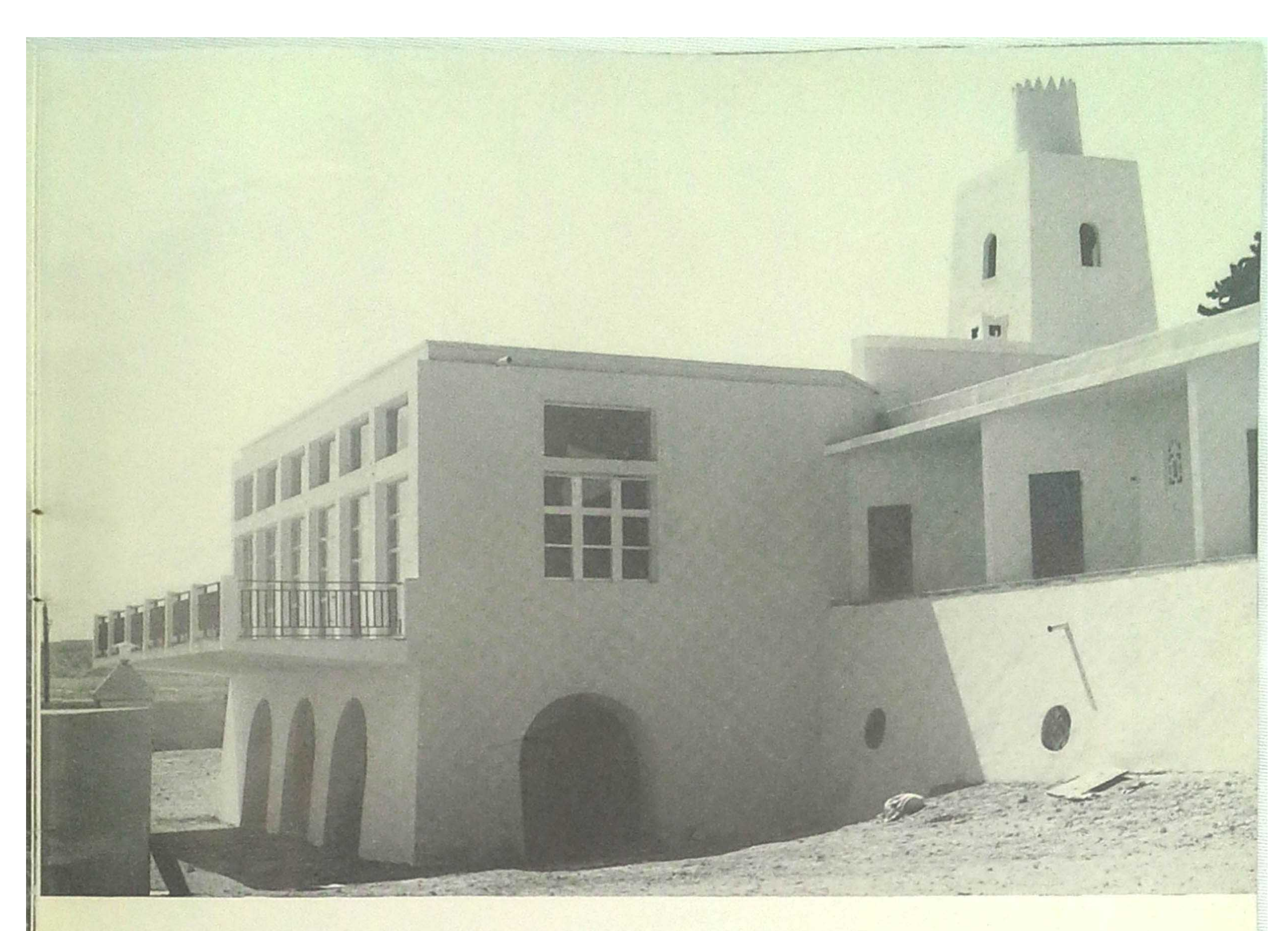
a rugged Naluti landscape

km. 130 The town of Nalut, after the steep climb from the plain to the heights. Nalut is a thriving *mutasarrifia* of about forty-five thousand (in 1969), comprising the eight *mudirias* of Nalut, Kabau, al-Haraba, Tiji, al-Jawsh, Hawamid, Tamzin, and Wazzan. Of the forty-five tribes in the *mutasarrifia*, six make up in great measure the population of Nalut: the Awlad ad-Dir, formerly called the Awlad Ibrahim; the Asaqara; the Azzaba; the Awlad Sa'ud; the Maqadma; and the Mataw'ia.



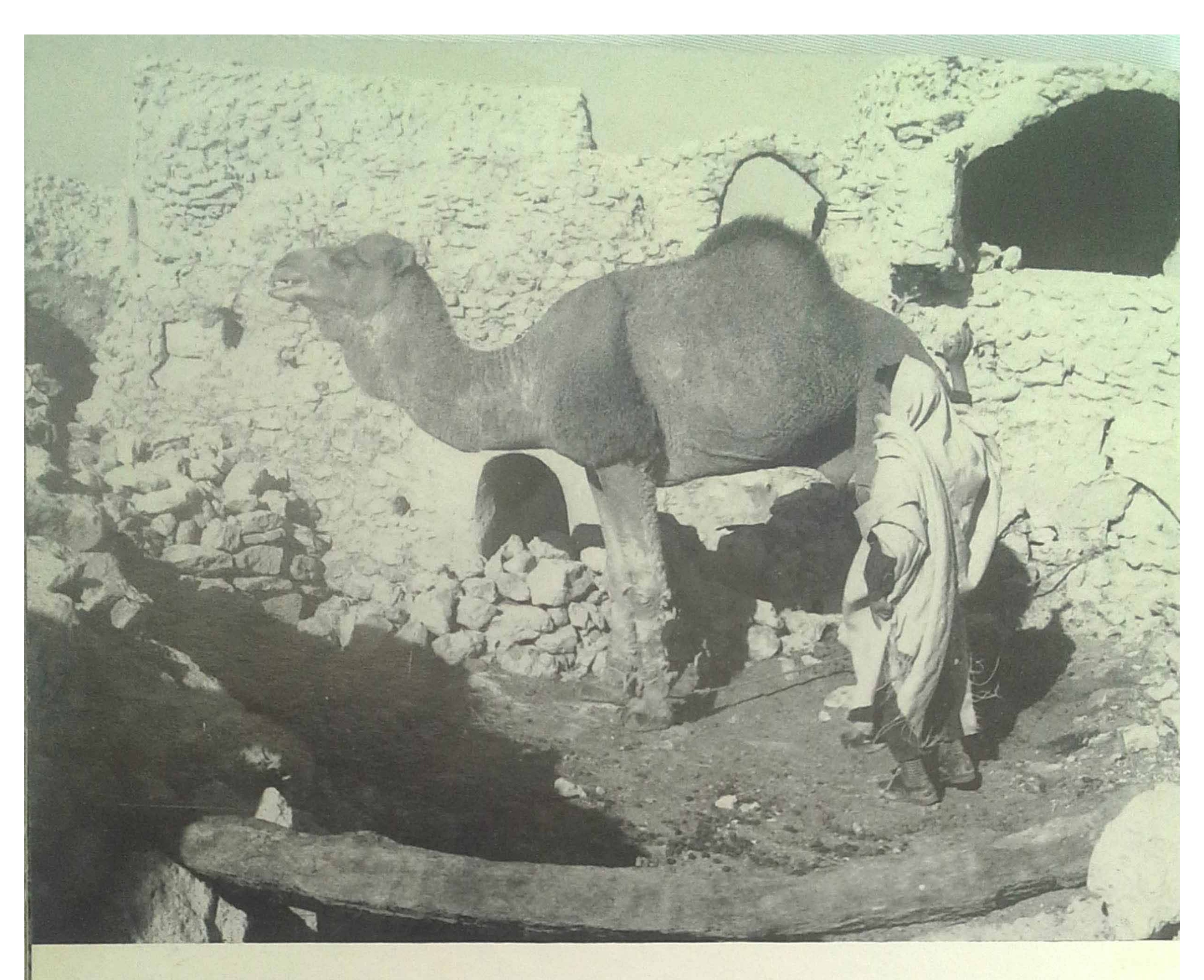
climbing up to the hill town of Nalut

A signpost off the main square on the same side of the street as the Town Hall points to Wazzan, 67 kms. to the west. Another on the main road beyond the customs post and police station on the left, and the *suq* and hospital on the right, indicates the direction of al-Juwaibia (km. 11), Sinawan (km. 117), Daraj (km. 225), and Ghadames (km. 315). At the time of writing this stretch of 315 kms. is a rough track with frequent patches of soft sand, but asphalting is in progress.



Hotel Nalut

If you stay at the Hotel Nalut, your room will overlook the present Berber *qasr* to the left. Farther to the right are the ruins of an earlier *qasr*. We once visited Nalut while the hotel was closed for renovation and sought a night's shelter from the police. Haj Ammar not only allowed us to use a room in the adjacent rest-house but even unpacked brand new blankets for our beds, and in the morning asked one of his officers to show us old Nalut, which is a maze of narrow gravel paths between tall walls. The municipally-owned warehouse is open daily from 8-12 and 4-6 for the use of Nalutis and inspection by tourists. Your camera is welcome and will be needed.

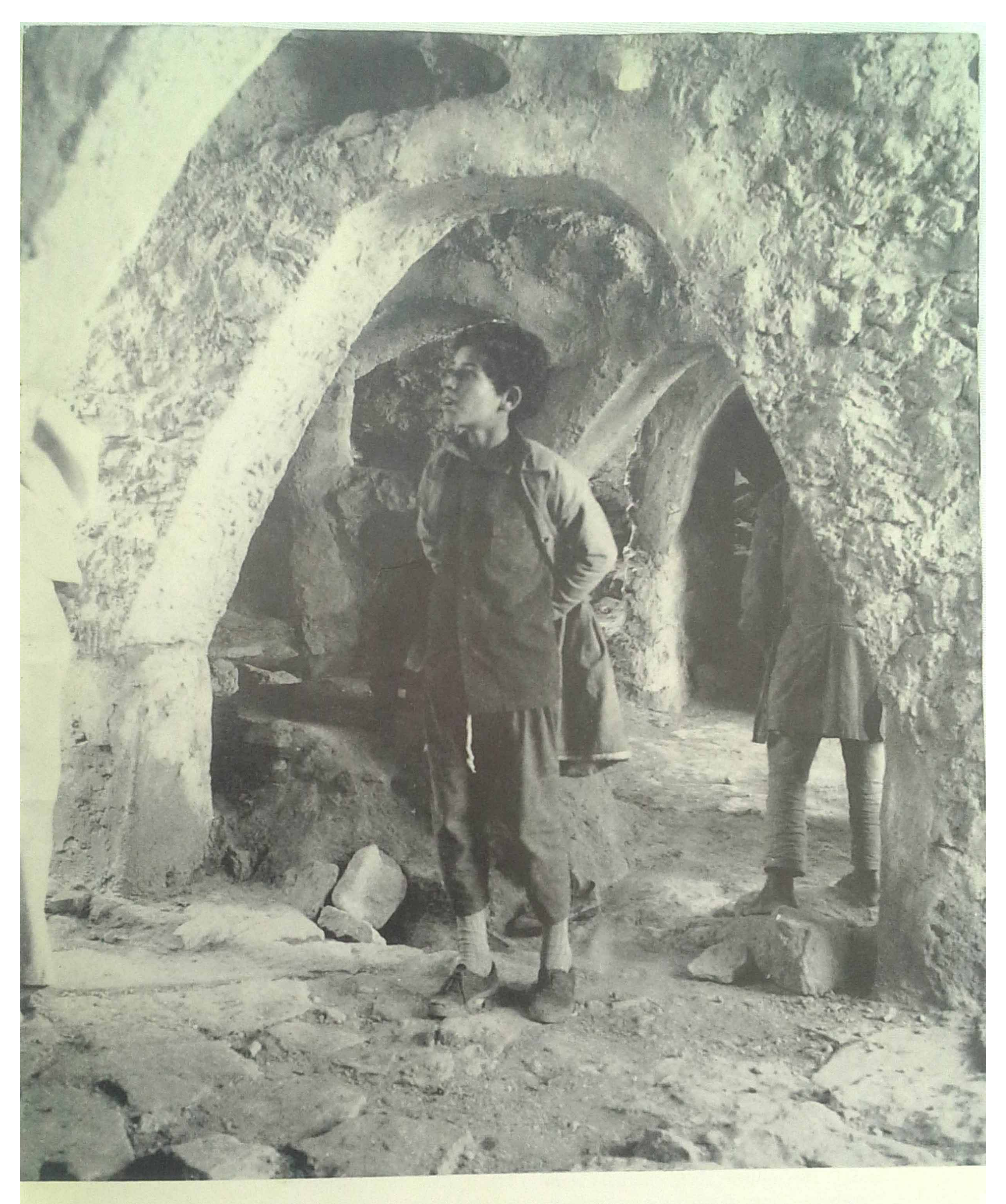


in old Nalut

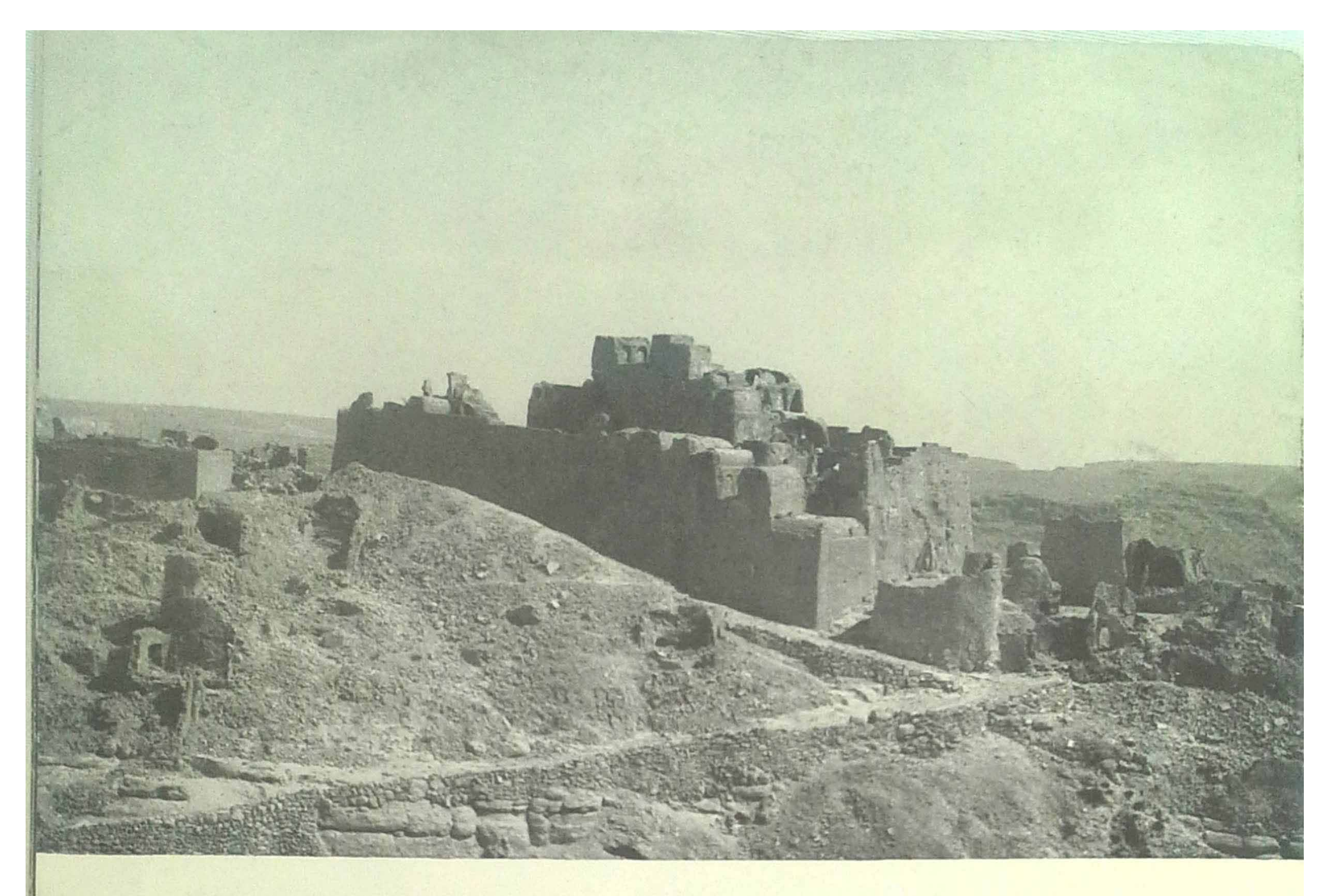
Nowadays olive oil, wheat and poetry are stored there—or so I misunderstood. Actually Muhammad Ahmad, who has been guardian of the warehouse since 1963, had said not *shi'r* (poetry) but *sha'ir* (barley): my ear as usual had perceived the unexpected rather than the correct word.

The *qasr* had five hundred cells, but heavy bombardment during the war has reduced the numbers intact to three hundred. Ruined Italian barracks lie far below in the wadi bed.

Unlike the round *qusur* of Wazzan or Qasr al-Haj, the warehouse of Nalut is roughly rectangular, with an island of rock in the middle excavated to provide extra cells on both sides. Rough steps carved at intervals afford access to these cells at all levels. The views down into the misty valley and across to the other windy crags are so awe-inspiring that little historical imagination is needed to summon up a picture of the siege of this castle during the second Turkish conquest, when the Nalutis committed mass suicide rather than submit to the invaders.



in old Nalut



outside the grain-store of Nalut

Kabau: The mountain road back from Nalut to Tripoli via Jadu passes near the villages of Tirikit, Abu A'isha and Kabau, the last of which has an interesting warehouse like that of Nalut, but smaller in proportion to its smaller population.

Wazzan: The round trip to Wazzan should be made in Land-Rover with a guide. From time immemorial Wazzan was known for its hand-thrown pottery but in recent years the last potter has gone to Djerba and the herding of sheep and goats is now the sole means of livelihood of the Wazzana. Neither are there potters in Nalut, but a large Tunisian-made *zir* for storing olive oil can be had of Ahmad Mas'ud Marah in the *suq* for fifty piastres.

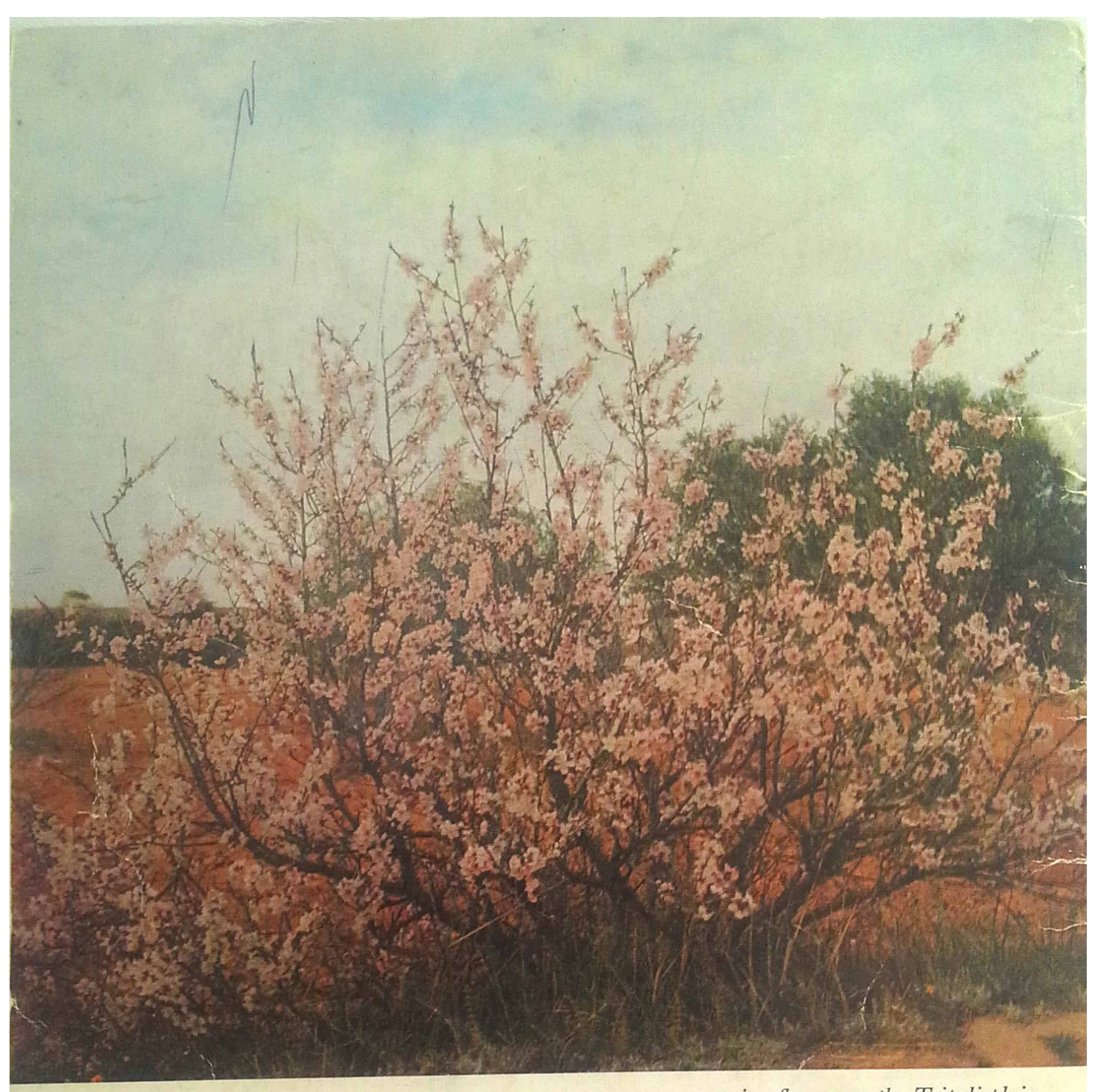
In case there is any doubt in the reader's mind about the welcome that he will receive in Libya, let this anecdote of Nalut serve without comment. Before leaving the town, I bade my friend Nuri goodbye. We exchanged addresses on a sheet of paper I was using for notes. He tore a strip off this and wrote on it: 'There is no God but Allah; Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah', and having divided this strip into two halves, he put the first on a shelf high up in the room, out of view, and the second in my pocket. It is believed that the profession of faith cannot remain incomplete: since one part stays in Nalut, fixed in a building, the other part—in my possession—must at one time or another rejoin it: a poetic unspoken certainty that I am bound to go back sooner or later to Nalut.



inside the grain-store of Kabau

Other books on Libya by Philip Ward

A Survey of Libyan Bibliographical Resources
Touring Libya: the Western Provinces
Apuleius on Trial at Sabratha
Touring Libya: the Southern Provinces
Tripoli: Portrait of a City
Touring Libya: the Eastern Provinces
Sabratha: a Guide for Visitors



spring flowers on the Tripoli plain

Oasis Travel Series No. 1: *Motoring to Nalut* was written by Philip Ward, illustrated by Angelo Pesce, and published by the Oleander Press, Rte 3, Box 234, Stoughton, Wisconsin 53589, USA
Printed in Great Britain by Ditchling Press Ltd, Hassocks, Sussex